

CPC Minutes of December 14, 2010

A regular meeting of the City Plan Commission (CPC) was held on Tuesday, December 14, 2010 at 4:45 p.m. in the Department of the Planning and Development (DPD) 4th Floor Auditorium, 400 Westminster Street, Providence, Rhode Island.

Opening Session

Call to order: Chairman Durkee called the meeting to order at 4:52 p.m.

Members Present: Chairman Steve Durkee, Vice Chairman Harrison Bilodeau, Bryan Principe, Samuel Limiadi.

Members Absent: Andrew Cortes, Meredyth Church

Staff Present: Robert Azar, Bonnie Nickerson and Choyon Manjrekar.

Approval of meeting minutes from November 16, 2010: Mr. Principe made a motion seconded by Mr. Bilodeau to approve the minutes. All voted in favor.

Approval of the CPC meeting schedule for the 2011 Calendar Year: Mr. Principe made a motion seconded by Mr. Bilodeau to approve the 2011 meeting schedule. All voted in favor.

PROVIDENCE TOMORROW

1. Presentation of the final version of the Downtown Plan by DPD staff

Ms. Nickerson listed the changes made since the last version of the plan was presented. A map showing vacant and underutilized parcels in Downtown and the Jewelry District was added on page 14, under the section on interim uses. Mr. Durkee said the amount of vacant land covered a large area. A discussion ensued on what constituted empty or vacant land. The definition of allowable height for development on Service Road 7 was clarified on page 21. Ms. Nickerson said the Federal Hill/West End/Reservoir Plan would elaborate the height limits for development along the Service Road. A paragraph based on comments received about pedestrian movement and amenities Downtown was added on page 21. A section on growing more trees Downtown was added in conjunction with the City Forester on page 59.

Mr. Principe asked how the propagation of parking lots could be controlled through prevention of building demolition. Mr. Azar said demolition would need to be approved by the Downcity Design Review Committee (DRC), which could prevent demolition or require a new building be built on the lot of a demolished building. A discussion on downtown building preservation and parking ensued. Mr. Bilodeau said he was pleased that connectivity between neighborhoods was emphasized. He asked for a clarification of interim uses on vacant and underutilized parcels based on the Core Connector Study and wanted to know what restraints could be put into place to prevent the lots from being paved over and serving no purpose. Ms. Nickerson said page 46 identified methods to implement interim uses. A discussion ensued on tools to regulate interim uses.

Mr. Durkee said potential housing locations in the Jewelry District could be targeted. Ms. Nickerson said the plan refers to all districts as mixed use. Perkins and Will, the firm handling the "Knowledge District" development plan said that smaller blocks in the interior of the district would be natural for residential development. Ms. Nickerson said the Knowledge District plan would be very specific on these development issues. A discussion ensued on development in the Jewelry District.

Mr. Durkee said that the Knowledge District boundary goes around Pine Street and asked Ms. Nickerson to consider including Memorial Boulevard within its boundaries because that portion of Downtown is emerging

as an entrepreneurial and life sciences center. Mr. Principe agreed with the assessment. Ms. Nickerson said she would include the change in the final draft of the plan.

Mr. David Kolsky said special attention needed to be paid to connectivity between Downtown and the Eastside, and preservation of view corridors, especially those that led to views of the state house. Mr. Andrew Teitz said he supported the plan and suggested that goals and objectives be prioritized in the final version.

Mr. Principe made a motion seconded by Mr. Limiadi to approve the Downtown Plan. All voted in favor.

CITY COUNCIL REFERRAL

2. Referral 3334 - Petition to abandon approximately 243 feet of the easterly portion of Frank Street that runs between Plain Street and Beacon Avenue.

Mr. Azar described the proposal, which sought to abandon approximately 243 feet of the easterly portion of Frank Street, which runs between Plain Street and Beacon Avenue. Mr. Jason Sisto, who represented the applicant said the applicant owned the parking lots along Frank Street and wanted the proposed abandonment area to connect the lots to the Bay Tower building and allow for future expansion.

Mr. Durkee asked if Frank Street was a functioning Street. Mr. Sisto said it was. Mr. Principe asked if there were any structures on Frank Street. Mr. Sisto said there was a house surrounded by the parking lot and an apartment building. Mr. Limiadi asked how Frank Street property owners accessed their properties. Mr. Sisto said they had access from Beacon Street. Mr. Durkee said owning property on both sides of Frank Street did not seem like an acceptable reason to close a functional street. Mr. Azar said the image in the staff report intended to capture traffic using the street. Mr. Durkee said City policy intends to abandon non functioning streets, unused or dead end streets. A discussion ensued on the configuration of the property.

Mr. Limiadi said cutting a functional street in half would pose access issues for emergency vehicles and vehicles using Plain Street for access. Mr. Principe proposed a motion recommending denial of the petition to the City Council. Mr. Sisto asked if it would be possible for the abandonment to receive a positive recommendation if all occupants of the street came out in support of it. Mr. Azar said that this area of the City had been damaged by the creation of “superblocks,” making navigation difficult. The proposed abandonment would propagate this pattern further. He said that houses had been demolished to accommodate the parking lot, which was undesirable. Mr. Sisto said one of the houses caught on fire and another was severely damaged. He said that he used the parking lot and was looking to redevelop the space for a live/work space or other commercial use.

Mr. Durkee said he could not support the proposal as presented. He said a full redevelopment plan of the site that justified abandonment may be considered, but not as currently proposed. Mr. Sisto asked if he could withdraw the petition after returning with a redevelopment plan. Mr. Durkee said developing live/work spaces was unforeseeable. Mr. Azar said that the petition was being made to the City Council and needed to be withdrawn from the Council, not the Commission. The Commission’s comments are not binding on the Council. Mr. Principe again made a motion recommending denial to the Council, seconded by Mr. Limiadi. All voted in favor.

MINOR SUBDIVISION

3. Case No. 10-040 MI – 104 Barrows Street - Subdivision of existing nonconforming lot with two dwelling units measuring 5,918 SF into two lots measuring 2,959 SF each.

Mr. Azar introduced the proposal to subdivide a small “L” shaped lot with two buildings on it, with an irregular line creating two lots measuring approximately 2,959 SF, with one building on each lot. A discussion ensued on the landscaping of the site and parking. Mr. John Garrahy, representing the applicant said the

Commission's approval would be conditional pending approval from the Zoning Board. Mr. Durkee asked for a clarification of the project. Mr. Azar said the subdivision would create two smaller lots with the creation of an irregular property line. He said that smaller, landscaped lots, each with one building, would be more practical than two houses on a single lot. Based on findings from the hearing, the location of the lot line could be changed by the Commission or Staff at the final approval stage. Mr. Azar said there were opportunities for landscaping that could be availed of in areas not used for parking. He said the Commission could attach a condition of approval requiring paved surface providing three parking spaces for each house, with the rest of the area dedicated to pervious surface. Mr. Bilodeau asked if a shared parking area could be maintained for both houses. Mr. Azar said it would result in excess paving, not leaving enough pervious surface.

Mr. Principe made a motion seconded by Mr. Limiadi to approve the preliminary plan stage of the subdivision, preserve pavement for 3 parking spaces for each house and replace the remainder with pervious surface in addition to conforming to the canopy coverage requirements of the Zoning Ordinance. The motion also included a positive recommendation to the Zoning Board of Review to grant the relief required for the subdivision and for final plan approval to be designated to DPD staff. All voted in favor.

PUBLIC FORUM ON PROVIDENCE CORE CONNECTOR STUDY

4. Presentation of Providence Core Connector Study - Presentation of an overview of the Providence Core Connector Study project, detailing potential modes of transport (streetcar, bus) alignments and potential routes.

Ms. Amy Pettine of Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) presented the Core Connector Study, a joint project between the City of Providence and RIPTA to build a streetcar system in Providence. The presentation detailed potential streetcar routes in the City. She presented a history of the project, which began from the Transit 2020 program and produced a report that recommended building a streetcar system.

She described conditions in the City and RIPTA that made Providence conducive to a Streetcar System including the density of downtown Providence, the presence of transportations hubs like Kennedy Plaza and the train station, and colleges and businesses. RIPTA has performed an alternative analysis, looking at a range of options including modern streetcars, enhanced buses and the "no build" option of not building new infrastructure. Three route options are being considered after open houses held in September 2010. One route will be chosen in January. All routes which go through the Thayer Street bus tunnel, service the train station and Hospital District. Routes were evaluated based on 12 developed performance measures like mobility, travel times, connectivity to the bus system, economic development and environmental impacts. Operating costs are similar with some differences in times. Ridership potential was factored in by studying activity centers around Downtown.

A discussion ensued on potential Streetcar routes.

Mr. Principe asked if his understanding of northward streetcars alternately stopping at the train station and bypassing the station when going southward was correct. Ms. Pettine said that was the case and passengers who wanted to get to College Hill from the train station could take a streetcar to Kennedy Plaza and take the next streetcar or bus going into College Hill.

Mr. David Kolsky said that the streetcar system could decrease the number of people in cars on College Hill. Mr. Bilodeau asked if reports of the Acela train bypassing Providence were true. Mr. Azar said that a train service faster than the Acela that is being planned would not stop in Providence. Mr. Principe said that the Streetcar system should also cater to people coming into Providence from areas north of Rhode Island as there is potential for creation of employment Downtown. Mr. Bilodeau said that a big picture or purpose from implementing the system was not clear and remarked at the lack of connectivity to areas like the Waterfront. Ms. Pettine said the presentation was focused on RIPTA's due diligence and financing efforts rather than the bigger picture.

A discussion on project financing ensued.

Ms. Pettine said that factors like the potential for new development, proximity of routes to transformative projects and walking buffers within an eighth of a mile of streetcar stops were being considered. Mr. Durkee said he was amazed at the finding that over 101 acres of vacant land was available in Downtown Providence. He said he was optimistic that the streetcar would spur development downtown.

A discussion ensued on factors that would spur development Downtown and along streetcar routes.

Mr. Principe asked if a partial subway system could be considered. Ms. Pettine said it was impractical given the sea levels in Providence. Ms. Pettine concluded the presentation saying that more technical aspects of the project would be studied through the year.

Mr. Principe made a motion seconded by Mr. Limiadi to adjourn the meeting. All voted in favor.

The meeting adjourned at 6:48 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'C. Manjrekar' with a stylized flourish at the end.

Choyon Manjrekar,
Recording Secretary